

WORD MEANING NEGOTIATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM COMMUNICATION

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Academic dissertation in Linguistics, to be publicly defended,
by due permission of the dean of the Faculty of Arts at the
University of Gothenburg, on December 11, 2015, at 1.15 p.m.
in Lilla Hörsalen, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg



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ABSTRACT

We all know that lexicons contain definitions of the meanings of words, but when we communicate with other people, these are not the kinds of meaning we use in interaction. In conversation, we coordinate with each other in a meaning-making process where we make use of a more flexible semantic quality associated with words, called meaning potential.

The focus of this thesis is on word meaning negotiation (WMN) in online discussion forum communication. WMN occurs when participants who are engaged in a discussion about a particular topic remark on a word choice of another participant, thus initiating a meta-linguistic sequence in which a particular word is openly questioned and the meaning of that word is up for negotiation. As a consequence, the ordinary flow of the discussion “on topic” is temporarily sidetracked, and the focus of the discussion is shifted to the specific word and its associated meaning. By closely studying the process of WMN and focusing on the behaviours and practices of the participants engaged in it, this thesis aims to empirically explore how situated meaning in concrete utterances is established by combining aspects of meaning potential with relevant aspects of the conversational context.

The thesis uses a method for qualitative interaction analysis influenced by Conversation Analysis, which devotes particular attention to how turns are related within each WMN sequence, specifically focusing on how participants orient to important aspects of prior utterances in the sequence. The analysis is performed on a sample corpus consisting of 60 WMN sequences gathered from three Swedish online discussion forums.

The results of the analysis show that instances of WMN occur either when there is insufficient understanding of the meaning of a particular word (WMNs originating in non-understanding, NONs), or when there is disagreement about what a word can or should mean, given a specific discussion context (WMNs originating in disagreement, DINs). The in-depth analysis of the negotiation process identifies several routine ways in which participants negotiate word meaning in NONs and DINs, resulting in a taxonomy of semantic operations that captures how the participants move between drawing upon aspects of meaning potential associated with the negotiated word and drawing upon relevant aspects of the situation under discussion as they collaborate to establish situated meaning.

Keywords: word meaning negotiation, semantic coordination, meaning potential, semantic operations, computer-mediated communication, CMC